

Session Twelve

Spirituality as a Guide and Support

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The NDEP strongly encourages inviting a medical person (health care provider or certified diabetes educator) to participate in any sessions that you conduct to provide support for the discussion and to answer any specific medical questions that may arise.

Background

Spirituality means many different things to different people, but it usually involves seeking strength, guidance, and support from a “higher power.” This support can help a person manage his or her diabetes. At the same time, it is important for people to recognize the practical aspects of diabetes care and to avoid placing their faith in unrealistic hopes.

Objectives

1. To describe ways in which spirituality, however it is experienced, can help provide support to making changes to live well with diabetes.
2. To verbalize that depending on spirituality and “faith” alone is not adequate to control diabetes.
3. To discuss what role spirituality can play in bringing family and community together to support a person in diabetes self-management.



Time needed for discussion: 45 to 60 minutes.

Materials

- DVD of the film *The Debilitator*.
- DVD player/TV monitor.

For instructions on borrowing *The Debilitator* film, see page 4 of this guide.

- Optional: Flipchart or blackboard for writing down key words from discussion.

Method

- Conduct a facilitated discussion (group discussion with a leader asking stimulation questions).
- Play the film, or select scenes from the film as needed.



Special Note: Discussing religion can lead to tensions as members of the group express their differences in religious views, and these differences can split a group rather than unite it. On the other hand, many self-help groups recognize the value of relating to a “higher power,” and many people will feel comfortable talking about spirituality as that which gives them inner strength of spirit. You may want to consider polling the group before you introduce this topic to be sure that all participants agree that it is appropriate for discussion. **You may also want to read the Troubleshooting section in this guide before proceeding with the discussion.**

1. **Ask:** Are there any scenes in the film *The Debilitator* in which spirituality plays a role?

Examples might include:

- The Dixon family members hold hands and say grace before the meal.
 - Calvin’s wife suggests that spirituality may be a good remedy for many illnesses.
 - The older African American woman in the support group says, “I’ve had diabetes for 10 years, but I don’t claim it. It’s my faith that keeps me physically, emotionally, and spiritually strong.”
 - In the first scene, the Dixon family is drawn together at the funeral in the church.
2. **Ask:** How does this spirituality help the people portrayed in *The Debilitator*?

Examples may be:

- It draws the Dixon family members closer together (in the scene at the dinner table).
- It is a possible source of support to give strength to the family and to the community.
- It draws the community together (the community at Calvin's funeral).

3. **Ask:** Are there any ways that a person might have a misguided idea about spirituality that could hurt his or her efforts to control or prevent diabetes?

Examples might include:

- Waiting for a miracle that may never come instead of taking control of one's diabetes and making changes.
- Taking a fatalistic attitude, such as "It is God's will," instead of taking the attitude that "God helps those who help themselves."
- Mistaking normal emotional reactions (such as fear, denial, depression, and guilt) for spiritual events that lead to inaction. For example, denial or bargaining may be expressed as the belief that "if I pray hard enough, I will be cured." Depression sometimes takes the form of guilt in a belief such as "God is punishing me."
- Others?



Special Note: Some people may think of organized religion (such as a Christian church, a Muslim mosque, or a Jewish temple) when you discuss spirituality, and they may give examples that include specific beliefs or practices of faith-based institutions. For example, someone may jokingly note that church suppers can be the worst thing for people with diabetes because of the dishes served, such as fried chicken and macaroni and cheese. Others may give examples of behaviors that violate their religious views, such as gluttony as one of the seven deadly sins or alcohol use as an evil.

Consider acknowledging these examples as events or views belonging to specific religions, and try to re-focus the discussion on the broad concept of spirituality. Avoid arguments over differing religious views.

Be sure to bring out the point that talking to one's health care provider and one's spiritual advisor about fears and concerns can help.

4. **Ask:** Are any of you willing to share how spirituality plays a role in your life? In keeping you healthy?



Optional Homework Activities

Ask each person to choose one of these optional activities to do at home:

1. Participants can create their own special prayer, meditation mantra, or positive thought to recite at a special, quiet time of day: for example, in the morning when they first wake up, when they go for a walk, before a meal, as they go to pick their child up at school, when they drive home from work, at bedtime, or whatever the best time for them may be. The special thought should be something simple to remember that gives them inner strength, such as "Every day, in every way, I am getting stronger and stronger." Or, "My blessings are many and my spirit is strong." Or even, "I can do it. I know I can."
2. Participants can try the "full cup of coffee (or tea or water) exercise" every day for a week. Describe the exercise to the group by saying: "Don't rush through that first cup of coffee or tea in the morning, and don't grab a travel mug and go. Set aside time—even one minute—to sit with this morning drink as a spiritual time, however you experience it. Sit down, hold the cup in your hands, and focus. Ask yourself: From where can I draw my inner strength today? Where can I find more strength to nourish my spirit today? What do I want from my full cup today? How can I fill it tomorrow?"
3. Consider asking members of the group to suggest other spiritual exercises that help them focus and draw strength.

Ask: How can these exercises help you control or prevent diabetes in your life?

Examples might include:

- By giving you the strength to resist overeating and other health-destructive habits.
- By reducing chaos and stress in life so that you can focus on what you need to do.
- By helping you to use the power of positive thinking to convince yourself that you can make changes, increase your physical activity, check your blood sugar by yourself, make that doctor's appointment you need, face getting checked for diabetes, stop smoking, walk more, or whatever it is you need to do.

